

■ 10 Conversations That Can Transform Your Workplace

by Tom Terez

I'll bet there's plenty of conversation in your workplace – about today's tasks, about that rush order, about that sudden snag, about the project that should have been done yesterday. But do you and your colleagues ever step off the task treadmill and talk about the workplace itself? If you work full time until retirement age, you're going to log at least 90,000 hours on the job. Doesn't it make sense to spend a few of those hours teaming up with co-workers to figure out how to make the workplace better?

Sure it does, but that only sparks more questions: What exactly should you talk about? How do you keep the conversation from turning into a gripe session? Is there a way to make meaningful discoveries instead of talking on and on about the obvious?

That's what this Top 10 list is all about. It gives you thought-provoking questions guaranteed to open up worthwhile conversation about your workplace. Share the list with colleagues, select the one or two questions that seem most relevant, then set aside some time to talk. There are no right or wrong answers, and you don't need a full day for this. Just an hour or so of dialogue, with ears and minds wide open, will deepen everyone's understanding and point the way to practical improvement.

1. Mind-engaging work

When was the last time you got so caught up in interesting work that you lost track of time? What were you doing? What was it – about the work itself, how you were going about it, its connection

to a greater good – that made this such a wonderfully consuming activity?

2. Seeing the fruits of your labor

When you want to see the results of your work, what do you look at? How do you know that you're having a positive impact? If you could wave a wand and instantly create a more meaningful system for tracking results, what would it look like?

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3. Positive problems

John W. Gardner observed, "We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems." What is your biggest insoluble problem? What makes it so tough to tackle, and what is the great opportunity that lies within? How would you go about pursuing this opportunity if you divided the challenge into manageable steps?

4. Meetings, meetings, and more meetings

How many hours do you spend each week in meetings? How many of these hours are well spent, and how many are wasted? If you could redirect that

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■ 10 Conversations That Can Transform Your Workplace *continued*

unproductive time to worthwhile activity, what would you do?

5. The voice of the customer

When your customers talk about your organization behind your back, what do you think they say? Who has the highest praise, who is most critical, and why? Now think about your own immediate customers: When they talk about you personally (and you know they do!), what do they likely say?

6. The community-individuality balance

What gets greater emphasis in your workplace: teamwork and togetherness, or individuality and diversity? If it's teamwork and togetherness, does the pursuit of unity prompt people to downplay their differences? If individuality and diversity are the main focus, does the workplace ever feel like a loose collection of conflicting styles and agendas? What can be done to maintain a good balance between unity and uniqueness?

7. From passive complaints to positive action

What is your biggest complaint about the workplace? Now, rephrase it in the form of a positive goal. Here's an example: "I'm tired of busywork. I spend half my day crunching numbers that no one looks at." Here's the corresponding positive goal: "I'd like to spend my time on work that relates to our mission and affects our customers. If my number-crunching has real value, I'd like to know exactly how." After defining the goal, think action: What can you and others do to make it happen?

8. Giving and getting respect

Johann von Goethe said, "The way you see people is the way you treat them, and the way you treat them is what they become." What did Goethe mean, and how does this play itself out in your workplace? What could be done right now to make respect one of the workplace's greatest strengths?

9. Can we talk?

Is there an elephant in your workplace – a big problem or concern that no one ever talks about? Something that's well-known to all and in desperate need of dialogue? If so, why is the elephant so unacknowledged? What are the risks of talking about it? What are the potential benefits?

10. Empowering yourself

"If I had just a bit more authority at work, I would ____." Fill in the blank with several actions you'd like to take right now to be more effective in your job. Then explore why you can't. What's holding you back? What is the one action you can get started on right now?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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